Opposition to Geothermal Energy on Flores: “The land is not abandoned”

Paulus Budi Kleden SVD is the Archbishop of Ende on the Indonesian island of Flores. We spoke with him about the integrity of creation and why geothermal energy does more harm than good in his archdiocese.

The former Superior General of the Divine Word Missionaries recently travelled to Rome and Sankt Augustin, Germany. There we had the opportunity to ask him: How does advocating for sustainability but opposing geothermal energy go together?

What does the integrity of creation mean to you?
It is part of our Christian faith, because we believe in one God who created everything to be good and gave us the task of preserving creation. This is a very important part of our faith, and that is why I believe it is important for us to protect the environment.

When a government promotes geothermal projects for generating renewable energy, it gives the impression that it is committed to protecting creation, doesn't it?
I personally, and we as a church in our archdiocese, are very much in favour of promoting ecological change — a change of mind, because it all starts with the mind. That is why we have been educating people for years so that they understand the seriousness of the environmental issue.

I am well aware that geothermal energy is one of the renewable energy sources. And it is necessary to switch from fossil fuels to renewable energies now. But what is a good solution in some places is not necessarily appropriate everywhere. What looks good on paper does not necessarily work in reality.

We are reasoning solely from our own context. We are not opposed to geothermal energy as such. It can be a very good thing, as has been demonstrated in other places. But on Flores, and especially in the Archdiocese of Ende, geothermal energy is not the right option for generating renewable energy.

What are the reasons against geothermal energy on Flores?
Firstly, the locations where energy is to be extracted from geothermal sources are in the middle of human settlements or in their immediate surroundings, on land that is particularly fertile for agriculture. This land is important to us — we need it. The right to food is also a human right.

The second reason is water scarcity. People are already complaining about water shortages in our area. We know that geothermal energy requires a great deal of water, at least in the initial phase, i.e., drilling.

Thirdly, the culture of the people is strongly linked to agriculture. And we are not talking about one or two locations where geothermal projects are planned, but almost 20. This presents people with a cultural change that is very sudden. Don't get me wrong: I'm not against cultural change. Every culture changes. But we have to make sure that people can keep up with the pace of change.

The fourth and very decisive reason: there is already a place where attempts to operate geothermal energy have been ongoing for 30 years – without success. On the contrary: holes have been left behind from which sulphurous gases continue to rise. They damage the roofs of houses. And right there drilling is to be resumed, funded by the German development bank KfW. I told them: “Please, the land is not abandoned. People live there.”

You are talking about Mataloko. There have been reports of landslides and emissions of sulphurous gases. Is there another place in your region where people have gained experience with geothermal energy?
There are two places: Mataloko and Sokoria. In Sokoria, testing of geothermal energy began much later. At least the production of electricity is working more or less. But people complain that the harvests from their coffee plantations have been declining since geothermal energy was introduced there. Vegetable cultivation is also suffering.

Because of the water?
Yes, that's what people see. But when they tell the operators, they get the answer: “That's not related; there are other causes.” They ask, “But what is the cause then?” The answer is, “You'll have to find that out for yourselves. It's not because of our operation.” People simply don't get credible explanations. In Sokoria, they were even put under pressure with the help of the military. In Mataloko, the operators only started asking people questions once KfW got involved.

What can people elsewhere in the world learn from what is happening in your community?
I think it's important to involve the local people, to talk to them and to be honest and transparent from the outset: What are the possible consequences? And who is responsible if anything goes wrong?

In Mataloko, for example, people see that it has become impossible to continue living there. It is not only the roofs of their houses that are

damaged. People are developing health issues. That is why some families are moving away without receiving any compensation. They are not getting anything, even though the situation is forcing them into this decision. That is why it has to be made clear in advance: Who bears the risks? Who takes responsibility?

What future do you see for the transition to renewable energies on Flores?
I say very clearly: geothermal energy is not an option for Flores. And I am not alone in saying this. All the bishops of the ecclesiastical province of Ende have published a joint letter. Since others and I spoke out against geothermal energy, many discussions have been initiated. Since it was said aloud that something is going wrong, attention has been drawn to the issue.

The islands of Flores, Sumba and Timor belong to one province. The government plans to focus on geothermal energy for Flores and solar energy for Sumba. Why shouldn't solar energy also be an option for Flores? There are several large dams there. They could be suitable for installing solar panels. Some of the islands that belong to Flores are close to each other. There are considerations to use the ocean currents there for energy production.

So far, it seems that the central government is still very committed to geothermal energy. This will meet with resistance. Our concern is that better and definitive alternatives are seriously discussed.

The original interview was conducted in German by the press officer of the German province of the SVD. Paulus Budi Kleden is fluent in German, having worked as an SVD missionary in German-speaking countries and graduated with a doctorate in theology in Germany.

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